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Dear Dennis,

We are well established in LA now. We are renting a lovely home on the westside. The kids are enjoying school and babysitter, we are renewing old friendships and making new ones, and enjoying the sunshine. After much thought and study I am eagerly getting involved with the "new video technologies" aiming principally to go into the publishing of videodiscs.

I won't bore you with a lot of technical talk, but the development of the laser optical system or "laserdisc" is especially exciting. You can put a movie on a laserdisc just like you can put one on a videotape or onto the RCA "capacitance" videodisc that is "read" by a diamond stylus instead of a laser. But that is nothing compared to what else you can do. First of all is the tremendous storage capacity of the discs. The content of the disc is divided up into frames like a movie, but unlike a movie, you can call up any frame you want in any order and keep it on the screen for as long as you want. The picture is of higher resolution than you get with broadcast signals or videotape and it is rock steady. You could take pictures of all the paintings and sculptures in all the major museums of the world and put them onto one two-sided disc. And if you wanted to compare the self-portrait of Van Gogh with that of Rembrandt, they could be called up to the screen sequentially, no matter where they were on the disc. (Imagine. All this and no bills for color separation)

But that is hardly all. This storage capacity, or really archival capacity, is great and people will find countless uses for it, but videodiscs will really come into their own as their unique 'interactive' ability is developed. The interactive capacity of the videodisc is a function of its ability to access the information stored on it (either still frames or motion sequences) in a random rather than a pre-set sequential order. For example you will be able to take tours of whole cities or museums (or zoos, or space, or the ocean etc.) where your interest determines the pace and depth of the tour.

Imagine yourself with a disc of the Museum of Natural History on the player. After the camera walks you up the steps and shows you the directory you decide whether you go to the North American Indian exhibit or the African animals room. Then you walk left or right around the room -- your choice. (You direct the tour by means of a hand held keypad connected to the videodisc player.) If your interest is piqued by the great ape you can key into a two-minute filmed segment of the ape in its natural habitat and if you want to go still further, a several page encyclopedia type article on apes is also stored on the disc. Actual visitors to the museum will be able to take home a disc on prehistoric life, the theory of evolution, the social customs of the NW Indians etc. The technology for all this has been developed. The hardware is on the store shelves and its not prohibitively expensive. It's the software that's missing.

It is clear that videodiscs will have a tremendous impact on publishing. I don't think books will become obsolete, not by any means, but many will exist in more than one format or medium and many will be "brought to life." For example, won't Random House want to put out the Dr. Seuss books both in printed form and in animated versions. (Big breakthroughs are being made out here which are making it more practical and economical to produce animated materials.) Won't a collection of performances of Brecht plays be a fabulous complement to the Vintage Brecht series. The Peoples Republic of China Cookbook would certainly be great on a disc which included both filmed how-to segments and the written recipes. Just a cursory glance at the Random House forthcoming list yields several intriguing possibilities, including "The 1981 World Travel Guide," "You and Your Toddler/Baby Exercise," "The AMA Handbook of First Aid and Emergency Care," "How to design and Build Your Own Home," "The Complete Indoor Gardener," "L.L. Bean's Guide to the Outdoors," etc. etc. Which of these wouldn't be far more powerful with the added value of motion and sound, without losing the self-pacing, random access capacity of a book.

One long term project I am interested in is the encyclopedia of the future. The whole concept of an encyclopedia will be radically transformed by the application of videodisc technology. Instead of 25 volumes you will have 25 discs, at no greater cost, which will enable you not only to read and look at pictures but to see and hear. If a picture is worth a 1000 words, how many words is a moving picture worth? The section on volcanos for example will include footage of the eruption of Mt. Saint Helens, animated explanations of the phenomena and several pages of printed data and further information. The section on space will have NASA

film, animation and scale models. The section on China will include a guided tour of Peking. The discussion of the ocean will be highlighted by a guided tour with Jacques Cousteau and colorful pictures of species from every ocean. The user will be able to determine how deeply he goes into any subject as there will be several levels of information available as well as instant access to related topics.

One thing that has occurred to me in connection with this is that the Random House Encyclopedia has an exciting potential for adapting to the videodisc format right now. I've always liked the RH Encyclopedia because of the way it organizes the information (not alphabetically but according to the way ideas and subjects are actually related) and because of its colorful modern format. It's not the encyclopedia of the future, but it is very much the encyclopedia of today, a very reasonable link, in terms of form, between the dry, linear look of the Brittanica and what is coming tomorrow.

I don't know how successful you have been with the encyclopedia, but I have the impression its sales have never approached the promise with which it was originally published. I think part of the reason is that on the one hand the price is too high for people who want a one-volume encyclopedia, and on the other hand, it's not enough of a book for people who think "Brittanica" when they think encyclopedia. Frankly I was shocked to learn that not one of the Santa Monica libraries, which are thought to be quite good, has even one copy.

I have several ideas of things that could be added, at little cost, to make the encyclopedia even more valuable in disc form and think that it could actually play an important role in making the laserdisc technology attractive to the consumer. Ideally, I would like to acquire the rights to the encyclopedia on a royalty basis and publish it myself. However, I am interested enough in the idea that I would be willing to work for Random House on a consultant basis if you wanted to publish it yourself.

I will be in New York in early January and would appreciate it if you would set up a meeting for me with the appropriate people at that time. I look forward to seeing you. Perhaps you will finally get a chance to meet the new baby.

Take care,



Bob